

## Public feedback on research into the expression of possession in Iaai: a moment that is meaningful

**Research into the expression of possession in Iaai began in 2019. Put on hold during the global pandemic, the teaching tools were then published and presented to the public in Ouvéa. It was a powerful moment for both the local population and the researchers.**

‘Research time is sometimes long compared with everyday life’, Anne-Laure Dotte, lecturer in Oceanic linguistics at the University of New Caledonia, told her audience. The international research project *Optimal Categorisation: The Origin and Nature of Gender from a Psycholinguistic Perspective*, led by Michael Franjeh at the University of Surrey in the UK and conducted in collaboration with Anne-Laure Dotte at the UNC, began in 2019, thanks to UK funding (ESRC). On 26 February, almost six years later, a public presentation of this work took place in Ouvéa. It was a rare and powerful moment, both for the local population and for the researchers.

### Three educational tools

Research into the expression of possession in Iaai has led to the creation of three teaching tools: a workbook of short stories with gaps, a grammar and dictionary booklet and a ‘Happy families’ card game accessible to all, even non-speakers. These documents can all be freely downloaded from the [project website](#).

These practical resources provided a rich moment of presentation. They were first shared to the Customary Council of the Iaai area (in Hulup). Anne-Laure Dotte and Wejë Bae, head of studies for Iaai and Fagauvea at the Academy of Kanak Languages, who played a key role in the production of these works, were received by the president of the customary council, Jean Thikon, accompanied by Laetitia Majele, head of the Ouvéa media library. After a traditional welcoming speech and a general presentation of the project, there was a lengthy discussion. ‘Seeing the grammar of Iaai projected on the screen opened my mind,’ explained the President of the Customary Council. ‘We have to be careful how we pass on our language. I feel it when I give customary speeches: some words lose their meaning.’

### Fewer children speak Iaai

One of the special features of Iaai is that it has 23 classes of possession. However, their use is tending to become simpler, which, according to linguist Anne-Laure Dotte, could be a sign that the language is losing its vitality.

After the meeting with the Customary Council, the researcher and the ALK officer met with the general public in Fajawe. Nearly 25 people accepted the invitation, including many teachers, as well as traditional leaders and religious representatives. The reception was particularly warm.

‘Thank you for this presentation, because we see scientists doing research, but we don't always see the results’, says Kallé Houmbouy, a first-year primary school teacher, before adding: ‘Most of our children understand Iaai but don't speak it any more. 20 years ago, children spoke it. Your research will help us to pay more attention to the way we speak. Because it's true that we tend to simplify the language. We think in French when we speak Iaai. We lose our own way of thinking.’

### Continuity in research

Some members of the audience recalled that tools had been put in place long time ago and that teachers created their own materials. ‘Our work doesn't come out of nowhere, it's part of a continuity,’ confirms Anne-Laure Dotte.

‘The continuity of the work of other linguists, but also of the *Écoles populaires kanak*. We know that a lot of initiatives exist, sometimes on a small-scale. Teachers are well aware of this, because they create resources every day! But there isn't always visibility, and the institutions are there to give these efforts greater scope’.

The researcher took the opportunity to remind the public of the role of the University of New Caledonia: ‘The University is the home of all the children of New Caledonia. We are a tool at the disposal of the population and the institutions. If needs are identified, we can work with you on research projects for the population. We are a tool for building together’. This proposal was heard in the audience, and several ideas for further collaboration emerged.

## Work to be continued

This public presentation was particularly appreciated by both the researchers and the public, who felt that they were being taken into account and listened to. ‘These feedback sessions convey meaning to our work’, says Anne-Laure Dotte. ‘They allow us to get feedback and take the pulse of the situation. It's always rewarding. Now, the danger with these tools is that we get complacent and stop there. Language is constantly evolving. This work has been a first step, but we need to keep up the momentum.’ The researchers have also encouraged teachers to send in their feedback after using it in their classrooms so that the resources can be improved. Above all, Wejë Bae and Anne-Laure Dotte hope to see these teaching tools used and annotated, as proof that they have actually been used.

(by Aurélia Dumté-Goossens, freelance journalist)

Bags with sets of Iaaï Possession tools (22 exercise book + 10 grammar/dictionary + 13 playing cards) were distributed to:

- Primary public school (Fajawe)
- Secondary public college (Shea Tiaou)
- Primary catholic school (Saint-Michel)
- Secondary catholic college (Guillaume Douarre)
- Primary protestant school (Eben Eza)
- Secondary protestant college (Eben Eza)

3 samples of each tool were given to the Public Library for its collection, as to the local office of the Académie des Langues Kanak in Ouvéa. A dozen of each tool was distributed to the participants both at the Customary Council presentation and the public presentation in Fajawe.



Image 1: Ouvéa island from the sky. (c)Dotte, 2025



Image 2: Wejë Bae, officer for Iaaï and Fagauea languages at the Académie des Langues Kanak. (c)Dumté, 2025





Image 3: Jean Thikon, President of the Iaai customary council and Laetitia Majele, in charge of the Ouvea public Library. (c)Dumté, 2025



Image 4: Participants at the presentation of Iaai possession tools at the Customary office, 26th February 2025. (c)Dumté, 2025



Image 5: Participant discovering the Iaai possession booklet at Fajawe public presentation, 26th February 2025. (c)Dumté, 2025



Image 6: Discovering the Iaai possession playing cards at the Fajawe public presentation, 26th February 2025. (c)Dumté, 2025



Image 7: Anne-Laure Dotte and Stéphanie Geneix-Rabault from the University of New Caledonia, presenting their research projects, Fajawe, 26th February 2025. (c)Dumté, 2025



Image 8: Participants at the presentation of Iaai possession tools at the Customary office, 26th February 2025. (c)Dumté, 2025